

# OLD AGE IN CATALONIA



MONTSERRAT GUDIOL, 1967.

FROM A PURELY PALLIATIVE AND MEDICAL APPROACH ON THE PART OF THE ADMINISTRATION, WE HAVE GONE ON TO GIVE INTEGRAL ATTENTION TO THE INDIVIDUAL. THESE CHANGES ARE REFLECTED IN THE DIFFERENT PROGRAMMES FOR OLD PEOPLE NOW BEING PLANNED BY THE CATALAN AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION AND THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN EVERY CITY AND EVERY TOWN.

MARIA PIA BARENYS RESIDENT LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY,  
AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

**T**he aging of the Catalan population is a slow but unescapable process, just as it is in other European countries. This process has been set off by the confluence of a series of factors, such as the fall in the birth rate, the increase in life expectancy amongst older people and also by the check on the flow of immigration, and finally by the ever larger generations reaching the age of 65.

It should be emphasized that this aging doesn't take place uniformly over the whole country, but is concentrated in the inner cities, especially in Barcelona,

where old people accounted for 13.3 % of the population in 1981 and 17.4 % in 1991. But in inland regions of Catalonia there is also a marked tendency in the same direction; because of the depopulation of rural areas as a result of the departure of the younger generations, old people today account for more than 20 % of the population.

It is also worth noting that in these older populations the fastest growing group is the oldest. In the city of Barcelona the number of people aged 75 or more in proportion to those of 65 went from 38.2 % in 1981 to 42.1 % in 1991.

In 1975 life expectancy at birth was 71.73 years for men and 76.78 years for women. In 1990 it was 73.77 for men and 80.82 for women. It is estimated that for the years 2000 to 2005 it will be 76.8 for men and 82.8 for women, average forecasts that are higher than for any other country in Europe. In 1986 there were 740,041 people in Catalonia over the age of 64, which represented 12.38 % of the population; it is estimated that in the year 2000 this figure will reach one million.

This absolute and relative increase in the population of old people, alongside



the social, economic and political changes that have taken place in our country, has, since about the eighties, caused the intervention of the authorities in these issues on a larger scale than before, as part of the approach to the crisis already affecting the Welfare State. In other words, we are going through a time of change; caring for old people was traditionally either the job of the family or else it was left to the religious organisations that looked after the destitute. Today, for the reasons mentioned and taking into account changes in family make-up and the scarcity of religious institutions, traditional forms of caring have given way to care programmes established by the democratic administrations. Old people, and not only those who are destitute, are the object of attention by the public authorities as possible voters, and as possible clients by private companies, who have filled the gap left by traditional caring networks. This, for example, means that the number of old people living alone, both in the country and in the city, is increasing all the time.

The current pension system, while insufficient for many, gives others a social status as pensioners which is comparable to that of pensioners all over Europe, especially if we bear in mind that the retirement age has dropped to 60 or less and that the state of many people's health allows them to continue an active life.

Today we can say that from a purely palliative and medical approach on the part of the administration, we have progressed to one giving integral attention to the individual, not as a passive recipient but as someone who is actively integrated in a network of proposals, considering also the characteristics of the new pensioners, mentioned above. In the sphere of the autonomous government, in 1986 the Generalitat de Catalunya started its "Vida als Anys" programme, which sets out to give a specific answer to the social and medical needs affecting chronically ill old people. The need to find a more global approach to the care and attention of the individual led to the Integral Plan for the Elderly (1990-1991).

In 1991, Barcelona City Council presented its Municipal Plan for the Elderly for the city, which within the broad conception of Social Welfare adopts an approach based on criteria of



MONTSERRAT GUDIOL, 1962.

integration for old people. The participation of old people in official decision-making takes place through the Old People's Advisory Council and the District Commissions that correspond to each city district. Other towns, especially the larger ones, have old people's programmes adapted to their particular characteristics.

As regards services, there seems to be consensus amongst the different administrations to allow old people to stay in their own home and their own neighbourhood as long as possible. In other words, as well as nursing homes and the conversion of existing homes, we also need day centres. We are also stepping up home-care and phone-care services. These services are also privately contracted or funded or are carried out in co-ordination with other organisations like the Red Cross or Càritas. Other services are intended to make up for shortcomings in pensions: discount cards for transport or entertainment,

tax exemptions, home improvements, etc. There are a large number of clubs and leisure centres belonging to the administrations or to private organisations, and the plan is to make them open meeting-places for intergenerational encounters, rather than limit them to old people.

The administrations also organise congresses, covering Catalonia as a whole or else large towns, in which the retired people's associations take part. Alongside this, volunteer services are being set up, involving old people as well as younger volunteers.

The club movement is firmly rooted in Catalonia and plays an important part amongst old people. The Federation of Senior Citizens Associations (Federació d'Associacions de la Tercera Edat, F.A.T.E.C.) is formed by 420 associations which, along with others, are represented on the F.I.A.P.A., the International Federation of Old People's Associations. In addition, the Aules de la Tercera Edat, A.F.O.P.A., have established 22 classrooms in Catalonia and are co-ordinated with the Aules Internacionals Universitàries de la Tercera Edat, A.I.U.T.A. Each of the trade unions has its section for pensioners, in which a more and more active role is being played by women, who make up an important group amongst old people in Catalonia.

Gerontological research and teaching is growing in all spheres. The administration promotes training courses for professionals. The University of Barcelona offers a post-graduate course in Gerontology and there are training and qualifying courses in other universities and nursing and social work colleges. The administration and private organisations such as the Fundació Caixa de Pensions award grants or prizes to promote study and research in this field.

The challenge facing us in Catalonia is that of finding a place for old people in our society, and this can be said to be an important moment in this respect in many spheres.

The European Community's proposal to make 1993 the "European Year for Senior Citizens and Solidarity between Generations" has received ample reply in the work of the different administrations and private organisations who have given a boost to initiatives and projects and to participation by old people. ●